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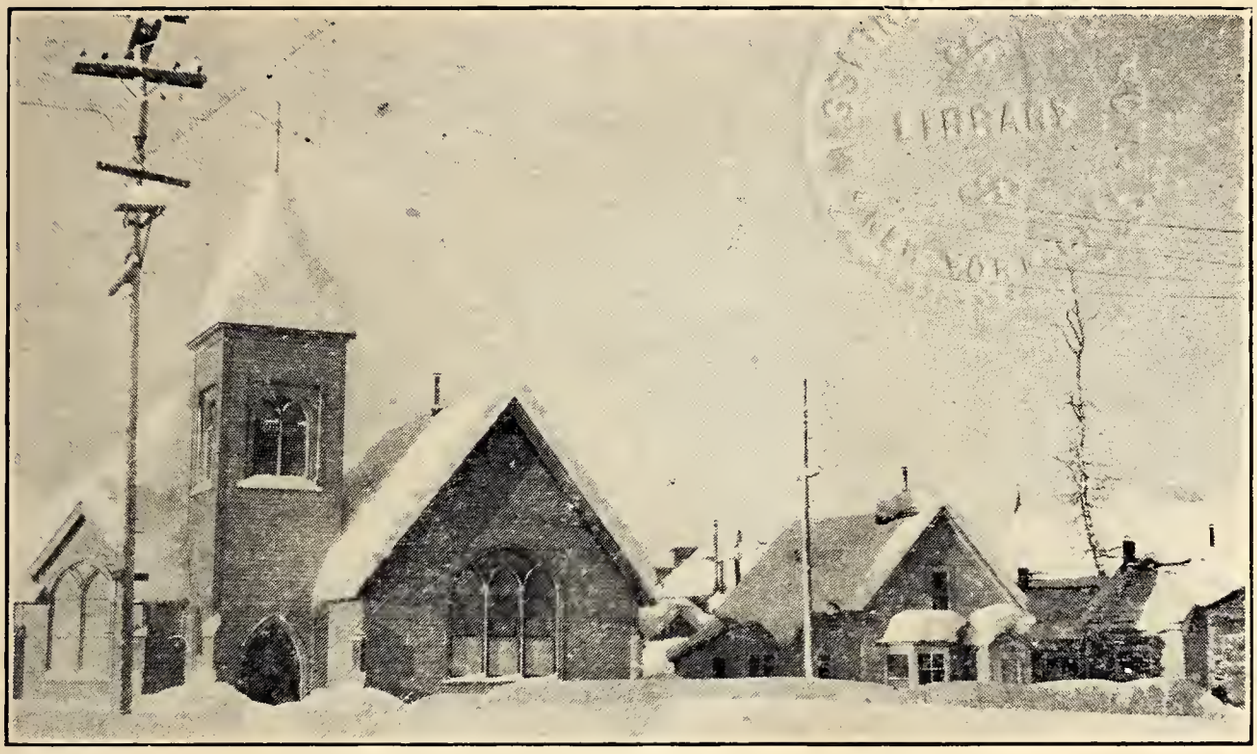
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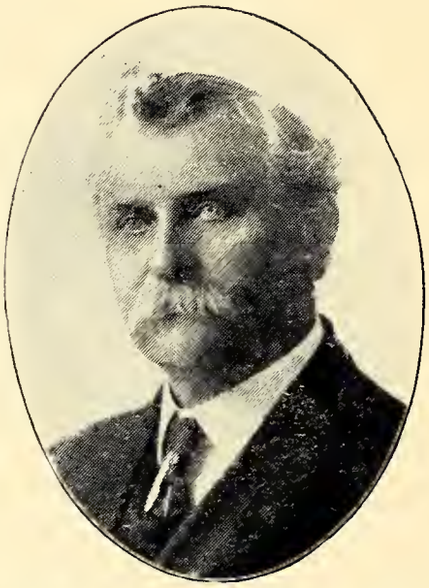
VALDEZ CHURCH AND PARSONAGE IN MIDWINTER

A CHURCH WITH AN EXPERIENCE

BY

REV. EDWARD S. BOLLINGER



REV. E. S. BOLLINGER

THE Alaska tourist today finds Valdez a quiet, clean and well-behaved community of about five hundred people during the summer months, without a city magistrate, marshal or policeman. The "Glacier City," as it is often called, is one of the few Alaska towns on level ground. Most of them hang on the mountain sides. The level ground is the deposit of a huge, dying glacier, reaching back into the mountains about thirty miles. The glacier is slowly receding, so that the [illegible] is a bed of level formation of about twenty-five square miles, hemmed in by bay, mountain and glacier.

The "city" was the dream of the first comers. Over the glacier was the first gateway to the great "Yukon Interior," where the mountains were seamed with gold, the river beds paved with it, and the valley foundations laid by it.

After some years a few choice souls who became permanent residents of Valdez saw the need of reminding even the transients that God is in Alaska also, even though none left their old surroundings for the purpose of seeking Him. Accordingly in the very heart of the city a little Congregational Church was erected—a house of worship exactly like many others throughout the States.

This church has had a history as wonderful as that of the "city" itself. There have been many pastors, but most of the time the people have been without a leader. The building has served as a public reading room and social hall, a parsonage, a banking establishment, a federal jail for twenty Japanese poachers, has been foreclosed on because of a questionable mortgage, and held by the saloon interests for some time, as it happens to be within a certain distance from saloon buildings.

During this period Valdez enjoyed no less than seven distinct booms, two disastrous fires and a number of smaller ones, seasonal floods from glacier streams that everybody knows are rushing and roaring down the flat, no one able

Members of the Valdez Sunday School

to tell where the next rush of muddy waters will break through. A dyke about twenty feet high and nearly four miles long now protects the city on the three dangerous sides.

Valdez did not remain the only gate into the interior and has come to resemble many other Alaska towns in one respect—a reduced population. There are enough houses in the place to accommodate two thousand people, according to frontier custom, but at present there are barely six hundred there.

There is a "coming back" certainty prevailing, however, and the members of our church have never permitted themselves to forget that the church was here for a purpose. It is the intention to supply the religious needs of the people who enjoyed Christian fellowship in other places and to care for the children and young people by maintaining a Sunday School that in efficiency is equal to the best of which the

present minister has any knowledge in many years of pastoral service.

The first experience of the church was a common one. The building was completed at the very time of one of the earliest boom collapses. A man who had assisted liberally, and who had promised still more liberally, was one of the many victims. In the burdensome encumbrance resting upon the building was included the cash paid by the liberal-minded man before his misfortune.

Even in the early days there were some laws restricting saloon interests. The church being so located that certain desirable corners could not be used for saloons, dance halls and kindred institutions, the building was a provocation. Friends of the saloon interests, through certain legal processes common in those days, got possession of it. And it was during the several years of this control that the strange

Six Girls Who United with the Church on Easter Sunday

experiences of the church came about. Like a certain temple of old it became a place of "exchange" and a "den of thieves."

Representatives of "mighty development" schemes appeared with strong financial backing. Valdez was to become the San Francisco of the north. The great interior was to be netted with railroads, all finding their sea terminal at Valdez. Buildings were at a premium and our church became the depository of great riches. At several places where the men stood when they exchanged gold dust and nuggets, made their deposits or withdrew them, the floor is almost worn through. A regular banking institution was conducted in the church, the floor-worn places being the location of the bank windows.

The year following, 1908, the house became a "den of thieves," when about a score of Japanese seal poachers who were captured in the act of taking seal from American waters in the Pribilof regions were imprisoned in it. One of the prisoners assaulted a guard and a general riot prevailed until quite a number of the Japs were temporarily "laid out" in a manner quite unbecoming their environment. There is no record of any Sunday School services for the welfare of the occupants. It is also quite certain that they were not glad when told to "go into the house of the Lord."

During all this time the friends of the church used the old log building which had served them before their house of worship was erected. After long and patient effort they succeeded in getting a reversal of the former court action and came into possession of their property once more.

Experiences continued, however. A pastor was secured and rooms in the rear of the building served as parsonage for the family, which included four children. A fire destroyed these rooms and greatly damaged the church. It was repaired and a comfortable five-room house was put up and

used as a parsonage. There are but few Protestant churches in Alaska, outside of Juneau, the capital, and the little company that makes up the Valdez congregation is holding on in the expectation of better days to come. Some of the mines around the town are running and it is likely that many others will resume operations before long. The place is the seat of the judiciary of the district and the officials of the federal government reside here. It is also the center of the cable system for the south main coast of Alaska, with its offices and corps of signal service men. These are some of the very excellent reasons the people have for not wishing to forsake the field. They have therefore decided to stay by and keep the higher ideals before the community, getting their inspiration mainly from the fact that they know the cause to be a noble one.

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